



After the Pause
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Contributors

Henry Brown is tired.

Tommy Dean is the flash fiction editor at Craft Literary Magazine.

Katherine Fallon is flappable.

Megan Rose Gosney is a Pacific Northwest poet who draws words from the mountains, deserts, coasts, and rivers and who has been published in Sweet Tree Review, Wordpeace, and Right Hand Pointing.

Kristi Joy is listening to 80s synth-pop in Spotify's private mode.

Imran Boe Khan, a reluctant chicken whisperer based in Dorset, can be found here:
<https://www.facebook.com/ImranBoeKhan>

Kateland Leveillee is

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere.

Cait Powell is a queer writer and software engineer from the San Francisco Bay Area who can sporadically be found on Twitter at @cait_for_short.

Evan James Sheldon is a new father, very happy, and very tired.

Rob Stuart is a writer, filmmaker and teacher from the UK.

Prem Sylvester is trying to live a good life until climate change gets us all.

Patrick Tong is a high school senior and writer from the Greater Chicago region.

Twila is in a long-term relationship with blue and green.

Hey, Sad Man

You hear stories like ours and people wonder how it could go so wrong? They make a big deal out of our "Suicide Pact" as if people don't break promises all the time. I've tried not to use your death for personal gain. Every narration is an attempt at fame, at belonging, at getting other people to give a fuck. I go to the bar, and someone recognizes me. How, I'm not sure. Maybe I've got tragedy written all over my face. The women settle in close, their hips nestled against my leg, laughing wildly. The men stand, coiled, ready to call *bullshit* as if they'd believe the truth, as if they aren't a part of this spectacle themselves. I've tried to remove myself, but there are nights when being an adult is just too much strain on someone who was supposed to flash away at fifteen. You called me oblivious once, but your death was the rotten fruit of knowledge.

Here are the facts, I say, listing them: Candy jumped off a bridge, she likely broke her neck and drowned. I was her best friend, we made up a pact. I'll never be the same.

Anything else is conjecture; estimates and guesses like faulty wiring sparking sporadically. The pain is a dull, but throbbing pulse connecting us like chemical bonds.

"Hey, Sad Man, tell us another," they say, lining up the shots in front of me, wagering when my words will slur too much for intelligibility. "I knew a girl. Candy was her name. And I loved her."

This is where the story should stop. Or begin again and again.

Darwin and Jesus Discuss the Effects of Use and Disuse

J: *How great is the darkness?*

D: Schoidt says it occurs by degree
The ordinary form
from light to dark
Then *those constructed for twilight* and
Finally,
Those destined for total darkness
The eye no longer a lamp but foggy crystal ball
A vestige.

J: *No one can serve two masters.*

D: Right, to paraphrase Goethe,
if nature spends on one side
it must be thrifty on the other
I mean the whole organisation is so tied together

J: *Consider the pelargonius*
corella
central and interior flower
head
umbel

They don't toil, neither do they spin

D: And the gradual sprouting of wings on a seed
Simply because a flower opened
Simply to enjoy the advantage of
Wafting on breeze.

J: Forms fall away

D: shift

J: into new life

D: and extinction

J: Yes

D: Yes

Flying Over Water

ABOUT THIS JOB: Search for underwater threats.
Deliver payloads of incredible firepower or
necessary manpower. Execute strategic aerial
maneuvers anywhere from the stratosphere to
just hundreds of feet above the sea.

— *THE UNITED STATES NAVY*

1.

December 31st and once again he swears
that this year, he's joining the Navy.

He'll move to Florida and reshape his corneas,
he'll learn all the kindest ways to say kill.

We're standing by the bar cart in our best clothes
as the dying year fades into a living one, minutes on the clock rolling over
as though each does not itself contain multitudes —

the belt I bought made from parts of an airplane
is a cancer beneath his coat, and when we lie spine to stomach
on a well-made bed, I won't reach back to unbuckle it.
The sweep of our bodies, arcing apart as though polarized —

I am reminded somehow of geometry. The way the world looks from above.

Yesterday he landed the two-seater
on a runway barely long enough to sleep on,
and our shared life is a city, seen from thousands of miles above:
the roads of it invisible until the nose dips down, its expanse undivided
until it splits beneath the scrutiny of closeness.

Death over water comes from uncalloused hands,
comes easy as pushing a domino —

flying the plane
 that drops the bomb
 that topples the bodies
not yours. A belt becomes the same as a noose.

I will never be able to steal as many moments from memory
as I would need to make up for this. I will never be that kind of thief.

2.

December 31st in the years after this one
and I will watch the ball drop in my pajamas, drinking \$9 champagne.
The bathroom by the bar cart had a mirror so high
it was like looking upwards to God, and I always meant to ask about the heart
of it.

Did his absence rest on a fulcrum —
if I had given, would he have stayed?

If I had backed myself up in that bathroom, if I had spread myself open like
fruit —

What can be had in return for unbuckling a belt? A life, my own or another's;
a champagne flute gone unshattered; a country unsplit by cities, a city unsplit
by roads. What altitude must be reached to overlook such divisions as these?

At what height does the familiar thing become the stranger:
 if I walk from our life to the next one, how close must I be to the border
 before I can tell I am no longer home?

A Small and Inappropriate Organ

IN THE PAST MONTH, HAVE YOU HAD NIGHTMARES ABOUT THE EVENT(S) OR THOUGHT ABOUT THE EVENT(S) WHEN YOU DID NOT WANT TO?

Listen. I know what nightmares should look like and I can tell you that I'm not having them. I have never sat up straight in the darkness, glassy like a husband from war. I have never startled from sleep with the lights of a house in my eyes. I believe that those who have nightmares wander the dark like dogs — slinking back to a house each night, a house where they used to live, their families packed into station wagons and the ribbons of road aching open. I believe this, and you can see that I do not leave my bed.

TRIED HARD NOT TO THINK ABOUT THE EVENT(S) OR WENT OUT OF YOUR WAY TO AVOID SITUATIONS THAT REMINDED YOU OF THE EVENT(S)?

The orange tree flowers in autumn and you can see that I don't resist smelling it. There's a road leading south to Los Angeles and I drive it at least once a year. Ask me if I avoid these things and I'll tell you that I do not. Each tender blossom is an antidote to emptiness, its perfume as vivid as a nose pressed to the skin behind an ear. Each familiar rest stop, asphalt and drought, the roll of the hills like a lake

dragged dry after a drowning — I hold a piece of string taught between my fingers, and then I bring my fingers together. I am returned, in an instant, to feeling.

BEEN CONSTANTLY ON GUARD, WATCHFUL,
OR EASILY STARTLED?

Watchfulness is only irrational if no danger is actively posed. He always takes the corner table in restaurants so he can see if someone comes in to hurt him, and in a world so full of enemies, doesn't such behavior make sense? I'm perching on a stool in a bar downtown, elbow to elbow with a friend — we are glass to glass, body to body, and if a man throws a rock at the window, isn't it natural to startle out of myself? Forehead pressed to the tile in the bathroom, tequila sticky on my hand — evidence speaks louder than the glass of the window and the evidence says there is danger.

FELT NUMB OR DETACHED FROM PEOPLE,
ACTIVITIES, OR YOUR SURROUNDINGS?

Why don't I deserve numbness, when numbness is so often a mercy? The girl who pierced your earlobe made you numb, I'm sure of it, ice cube dripping down her hand and down your neck. If a tooth rots we are numb, if our bodies are incised we are numb. Slip into a frozen lake and feel your extremities retreat from sensation like an army, like a frightened dog. Feel your breath pull back, feel yourself shrink into the thimble of your heart. Feel how you don't have to feel, and feel how that feels good.

FELT GUILTY OR UNABLE TO STOP BLAMING
YOURSELF OR OTHERS FOR THE EVENT(S) OR
ANY PROBLEMS THE EVENT(S) MAY HAVE
CAUSED?

It's not that hard to predict. An apple with a razor in its flesh like a womb, an empty house and an unmanned bowl: these things will hurt you if you let them. October comes and the sheet ghosts flutter from the houses, the world clings to the idea of autumn — I slice fruit open before taking a bite, I won't eat what tastes too sour. I understand that I am complicit in the ways that I am in pain. He pressed something that tasted like love to my lips, passed it from his mouth to mine, and I understand that I am guilty, because I held it melting on my tongue. Because I sucked it smooth like candy and because I let it take root, a small and inappropriate organ; because I knew it would hurt, and it did. Because surely I shouldn't wish for it still. That terrible pebble of a thing.



Katherine Fallon

The Book on Fractures V-VIII

Author's note

The following poems were culled,
randomly, from the 1980 medical textbook
Fracture Treatment and Healing
(Heppenstall).

The Book On Fractures V

A halo appears when complaints of pain
or weakness cease. Such loss is simplified
by remembering, which allows the uninjured

to believe that early cooling and tension
are signs of passage not on, but back—

back to the other—the good—
table of the past, dressed in a sagging cloth
that lies supine below the body, not above.

The Book On Fractures VI

Whether blood's between the ribs
or beneath the nailbeds;

whether the neck was broken
by grip or fall;

whether the emptied capsule
was ever even prescribed:

for coin or for freedom, the other half
is frequently responsible.

Each person keeps secrets
that are not secret at all,

and periodically, mirrored
isolation will lead here,

to the flattening out of what was
once a fullness—

The Book On Fractures VII

.

The author suggests exploration, even if
it is not at first successful. Do not abstain
when good relief can be obtained.

..

If too vigorous, it becomes an essay
in frustration. It is better to switch hands
than to make several attempts with the same.

...

Do not feel a way about it. Anymore,
it has received enthusiastic acceptance.
In some circles, it is even considered

treatment. The medical community
assures there is nothing to it
but the effort to decrease pain.

....

All this may be accomplished
by one person, each wholly alone,
and such is wholly acceptable.

Here, for once, the presence
or absence of another is immaterial,
which is certainly a bright side.

.....

One needs only the oldest technique

still in use today: ten twitching digits.
An apparatus could help, if it proves

therapeutic, but certainly nothing else
with tongue or nerve. Avoid anything with
anything thriving within the chest cavity.

The Book On Fractures VIII

Sudden tenderness tipped her off
to her place in the precarious periphery.

At first, it seemed an improvement,
but its aim was merely off, bleeding

past its intended boundaries toward
the fractured start. New skin brought

back the nerveless heart. She imagined
the other two using the same positions,

same maneuvers she had memorized,
and doing so without her present.

Crushing, these newly grafted bodies:
one familiar, one foreign, both stiff

and loose. She fashioned herself a clean
guillotine, performed her own excision.

A blessing, a dressing: to divide,
to give rise to her self.

portrait

exhale and soon encounter new air's redemption
fade to focus: slip into the silent humming
winding off gleaming white catchlights,
eyebrows wrinkle, reveal syncopated rhythms:
if you like, i'll run headfirst into the hum

pupils pounding timpani lightscape gleaming!
projection of You stretched on paper under glass,
frozen moment of fresh air / You look slightly away;
earth moves slow underfoot and we listen

can you hold onto an instant's breeze blowing through
without drawing in the air and making it yours?

wishes worn-out, flying faster than light will come
to you as you hold on; they cry for an answer
they sink into eyes' humming, pray softly to be seen
they bury their dead between your soft shoulders

swallow evening's dry motion, look up and rejoice:
crawl into gleaming cobweb of streetlights.
wishes work fast, sixtieth of a second
give form to hopes long left disembodied
instant dissolves dynamo; breath pushes on.

Goodbye to Indehiscence

The morning after the first time I don't wait, you've set out a brown paper bag, wet at the corners, with unseemly little rumps peering out of the top like a poor man's Cézanne. My name is Eve and I wipe the pulpy juice from my chin with the same hand that holds the fruit. Now comes the realization I'm not wearing a bra, an awareness due to the mild pornography of the fuzzy orbs but also because a peach is a drupe. And what is a drupe? I'll tell you what a drupe doesn't do. A drupe doesn't split open to spill its seeds when ripe, like milkweed or evening primrose. It waits virtuously- a plum, a cherry, the supple part, skin and flesh- exocarp and mesocarp embracing a shell of stony endocarp with a single seed tucked modestly inside. Now consider the pseudocarp, strawberries with seeds on the surface of skin, and define provocative again for me? Back in the still-life of your kitchen, I study the remaining soft, sunset-colored spheres on the table and you, frozen in concentration, scrutinize hot raw batter for bubbles, all of it, waiting, like a girl with a purity ring.

Disposition Authorization Affidavit

- I. *But, they made it into something beautiful*, he explains, holding the owl figurine in his hand. It is made from the ashes of Mount Saint Helens. But, all I see is ash and all I hear is *why* and it seems so wrong for an owl to scream *why*.
- II. To answer the question is to assume one of three reasons:
(1) God allows it.
(2) There is no God.
(3) There is no answer.
Hence, my silence.
- III. White lilies rise from the ground, children of the dead, and I wonder:
Might I also gather their shadows, their length, and cast them into shape? A figurine? When I die, I want to be cremated and blended with the dirt so that I take up as little space as possible.
- IV. To whomever may dispose:
Do not shape me.

Triptych with Sea

In the first shot, I am watching
my mother's silhouette rim the scene
with humanity. Malibu sunset in

flicker creases my eyes, flits our
 shadows into story. The rocks stumble
into a stutter over the eddy,

slick violence ebbing away from
 the family. To my father, every good
son must do these things–

I am to admire his sacrifice &
invent my own, pretending my quiet
pain could never surpass his.

*

Here is where I first speak The
 Mandarin of *home*, tongue choking
for shape like a shoreline. All words

reversed into hymn, lapping through
 the cathedrals of my throat. My mother's
voice hushes over the salt-smoked
wind. If this is not regret then call it
 something worse. A grief-swaddled moon
ascends before my gaze like the truth–

my sandals twisting bloodlines
 across my feet; my father's cliffside
temper snagging away the silence.

*

Some days, my mother believes
 the horizon bleeds clean as a beckoning.
Surely there is something tragic

about the cold limp of our bodies,
 or the slack-jawed night swallowing
our prayers into another history.

Dusk draping over, my father says
 the most natural disaster is only man-made,
torrents of loss awoken in the distance—

my mother murmuring as she tides
 her eyes over the oceanside, as if to tug
back her country by the wrist.

Patrick Tong

Aubade Uncensored

Homage to Chinese students of the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989)

For weeks, I awake with some type of
hunger in my throat, nameless and
desperate like a wound. Neighborhood
girls sour their mouths with the heat,
my tongue folded around the freedoms
we wait for. Cities drunk on testimony,
and I armed with dangerous witness—
could say government, could say tyranny.
Could say tankmen rolling against the
dead of night. Summer catches a mother
into the fire of history, suffocates her
child before the soldiers can. War story
stacked onto war story. Like bodies.
Facedown. Unblinking. My district
shot into blackout, lampposts empty
by the minute. Gas conquers the light
and orphaned blades litter the concrete.
Hours later: the sky gaping open into
a mausoleum and I shaping ashes into
an epitaph, memorizing the way this
flag always stutters like a fraud—

Plague as Business

Disease begins with a feint. Prods flesh.
Thins blood. Infection turns translucent
and shows us life on the other side.
Not the same. Not us. Not inhuman, but
empathy comes discrete. A prediction.
The doctor tells me I am too broke
to live. A cure has a cost. An excision.
I hold on to this phantasm like it's fate.

Disease wears my skin. A facsimile,
a parasite for our times. It has shape.
Gives shape. Makes its home in the abscess.
The pharmacist asks me to pay for medicine
and I think I see my disease in him.
I count out my pills by sickness. Tomorrow,
they'll all be at the bottom of my kitchen sink,
my friends assuring me the nausea will pass.

If we were reasonable people, disease
would be a synonym for the worst of us.
Instead, we house it. Exalt the bloodletting
for the good of the greater silence.
Penniless and pitiful. Who's paying attention?
On the prescription, the caduceus unwinds.
We invest in coffins long before we die.

Fairlee

I get lost on the way to Boston
Lost somewhere on one-eleven
I call and tell you I'll be late
You yell me straight to Concord.

It's not my fault! I say.
But I'm high and you can hear me laughing.
I tell my friends to be quiet
But they keep yapping on.

When I say it's not my fault what I mean is
 you were too good for me anyway
When I say it's not my fault what I mean is
 you were my favorite part
 of me.

Do you remember when I surprised you in Fairlee?
The look on your face right before you recognized me
In the doorway of the boathouse where you worked
The boathouse where you had your first.

The way you could not look at me.

It took you four weeks to decide you loved it more than me.
I had lost myself and now you, too.
I couldn't shake the feeling you were following a path
Made clearer by my shoes.

You don't call to say that you'll be late.

I unfold a chair for you
For when you find your way.

Annunciation

Our attic claims your bridal dress for food,
that perfect slant of light -
how we destroy it. As white turns to darkness,
an abandoned thing learns to keep to itself,
all sentiment moot, a shrine for feelings
its former owner can no longer pronounce.
In an outgrown clothes pile, a stray pelagonium branch
flowers through the dust of your single-use kimono,
its green overhanging beak peering down through the loft's cracks
like a God hunting the anxious dead for a sinner.
We fashioned this rot, the love on the leash we're walking,
and when its soul inherits the Earth,
no one will know who spared it,
no one will know the ones who died apologizing
for the simple fact it was ever here.



Simon Perchik

Five Poems

*

Empty and the sand
follows you along Broadway
as if some dampness

was left for shoreline
moves the IRT up
then down the way clammers

use their feet to rake
--you walk on tracks
careful not to miss

while the train underneath
breaks open its doors
all at once --no, you don't jump

nothing like that
--these shells are the same
the mad feel for

though their sweat takes the place
water grieves into
and their mouths are the same

let you yell down
and not a mark inside your body
to call you by.

*

This slope broken loose
cracks the way all ice
rises from a single stone

though below the tree line
just her grave
already has a twin

—two mouths, easy to spot
not yet the mountain range
she would sip if it was water

could leave the hollow
the underbrush, mouthful
over mouthful, talk

sit across from you
while her words no longer move
are in the way and colder.

*

And though the Earth lets you dig
it's your tears that heat the ground
already growing stars

once the darkness covers it
to lure these dead here
with stones scented with shorelines

returned not as rain but grass
just as it was, closing in from all sides
the way this shovel is warmed

by your hands kept wet, pulled
closer –you cling to this dirt
as if it once was an afternoon

knows only the slow descent
hand over hand into stone
that no longer opens to hear the bleeding.

*

Leaning against the wall
it becomes a death bed
the way a name on paper

flattens out to take hold
for which there is no word
only a room where no one noticed

you didn't ask for help
so close to the corners
with the light still on.

*

It was a birthday gift, sent alone
the day before your heart leaves
for a place that's safer –a book

on travel, what to listen for, by yourself
in walls that let you look back
while your shadow is taken away

–it's too soon! the ribbon is still splendid
will spend the night the way a sailor
learns to tie huge sails between each arm

stretch out, not yet rope, clinging to a sea
from a boat that's lost, is closing
while you embrace the dark gray pages.

Rob Stuart

Cigarette Poem

cigare



Rob Stuart

Casualty of War

I.

Soldier

II.

Veteran

What Our Fathers Have Killed

I creep downstairs. I want it to be a surprise.

Oh my god! my father says, and jumps up from the breakfast nook. He runs to the mantle and pulls down the rifle. *I already killed you!*

I rush to him and we wrestle over the gun, him in his morning robe, me in the wolfskin.

It's me, dad. It's me! I yell, but he's lost in his memories. I tear the rifle from his hands. It falls to the floor and the stock breaks like daylight over a far shore. *Get out!* he yells. *That was my father's gun! Get out!*

I go outside, a bit sullen, and try to hunt some deer, but they are all too fast. I howl at the moon, but it is sunny and the moon is just a white eye staring back at me from a choked face. It doesn't quite have the effect I'm looking for. I go to 7-11 to get a slurpy but the cashier tells me *No Shirt No Service*, so I steal it because I am wearing a shirt, just not one he's used to.

I drink the slurpy too fast and my stomach hurts. I feel bad, and I begin to feel bad about the gun. I go to a sporting goods store, but they don't have any antique, black-powder rifles. As I am discussing my options with the clerk, a polar bear walks up and begins to tap the glass with his claw. *Fight with your dad?* I ask. He shakes his big ruffled head forlornly. *I know better than to surprise him before his coffee.* An albino alligator and a lynx are already browsing the handguns.

I settle on over-under shotgun, though I know he won't like it, but I am grateful that Colorado doesn't have a waiting period. On the way home, a pheasant flies out in front of me. I'm so startled, I shoot it, but up so close it just explodes into a shower of feathers and hollow bones. They stick in my fur and I can't clean myself with my claws.

At home, my dad is reading a news app on his phone. *It's a shame about the state of the world today. Just a damn shame*, he says, and then he notices me. *You look ridiculous. Wolves don't eat pheasant.* And he plucks a bone from behind my ear like a magician who doesn't know many tricks. When I

don't laugh, he closes his fist around the bone and leaves as if it was really his to begin with.

About

Founded in 2014, *After the Pause* is an online literary journal based in Indianapolis, IN, featuring poetry, flash fiction, and artwork, published quarterly.

We look to feature the best creative arts from new, emerging, and veteran creators.

Find us at afterthepause.com or on Twitter @afterthepause and Facebook /afterthepause.

The editor of *After the Pause* and the overseer of its entire doings is Michael Prihoda.

Purpose

We believe art is a product of life experiences, from the joyful to the heartbreaking to the absolutely mundane. Life throws pauses at us. Art follows the pause. We want to share the best art we can find and bring hope through those artworks.

Cover Art

Designed by Michael Prihoda.

Departure

Until next time.

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